

Kayla Parker (2013) 'Jamming the machine: the personal-political in Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time*' in Rebecca Emmett (ed.) *The Arts and popular culture in history: proceedings of The Role of Arts in History cross-disciplinary conference*. Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press. ISBN: 978-184-102-355-7. pp. 217 – 233.

## **Jamming the machine: the personal-political in Annabel Nicolson's *Reel Time***

**Kayla Parker (2013)**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter concerns a performance of cinema that was presented on only a handful of occasions at a few London venues, such as the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and the London Film-Makers' Co-op cinema space, which was located at that time in a former Victorian dairy, during the early 1970s. Entitled *Reel Time* by the young woman who created it, this artwork is ephemeral, only existing for the duration of the few minutes of its live performance. There is no record of these events beyond some brief, written accounts of audience members and the artist herself, and a few black and white documentary photographs. Yet this 'projection performance' resonates almost forty years later with a nuanced complexity that is breathtaking, seen from our perspective here in the twenty first century: for its thinking-through-practice and inscription of the feminine, and for its articulate address of the very real issues faced by women at that time, and in the years following.

### **Context**

Annabel Nicolson is a woman whose practice has been most often viewed, by male historians and scholars, in the context of her contribution to the formalist concerns of 'materialist' film and expanded cinema. Her 1973 film-sewing performance *Reel Time* is cited as a key work of Structuralist film, with reference to her membership of Filmaktion, the informal group of film-makers based in London in the early 1970s, which presented live film projection events (Dusinberre, Curtis, Gidal, Le Grice, among others).

Structuralist film, also referred to as formalist or materialist film, is a set of critical approaches and practices adopted by the pioneers of avant-garde film of the 1960s and early 1970s who rejected a commodity based gallery system and the outdated film production models of mainstream, commercial cinema. The evolution and development of the expanded cinema of live film events, experimental moving image performance 'happenings' and installations is illustrated by the Filmaktion group, of which Annabel Nicolson was a member. David Curtis describes Filmaktion's principal concerns as being: 'to dramatise the film-projection event, to give viewers an active role in which they construct their own experience, and become aware of the elements that have contributed to it.'<sup>3</sup> In recent years Nicolson's work has been subject to reappraisal by female commentators and has been discussed in broader contexts and in relation to her

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<sup>3</sup> David Curtis, 'A Century of Artists' Film In Britain: Programme 1: Filmaktion', *Tate Britain* [website] (London, 2003). Available: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/century-artists-film-britain/century-artists-film-britain-program-5> Accessed: 11 February 2013.

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wider practice as an artist (Hatfield, Reynolds, Sparrow, Gaal-Holmes).

Nicolson's *Reel Time* is cited also as a canonical example of the early work of expanded cinema originating from members of the London Film-Makers' Co-op. The audience position in expanded cinema is different to that of conventional cinema, which presents a two dimensional photographic illusion of reality projected onto a highly reflective fixed screen within a proscenium arch, with the technological components of moving image and audio presentation being concealed. Proponents of expanded cinema sought to expose the illusionism of film as a carrier of photo-real meaning and to foreground the mechanics of representation. Nicolson and her contemporaries presented film in spaces other than a 'proper' cinema with fixed seating directing the audience's attention forward and upward to the screen, projection equipment hidden in a booth, and so on. They sought to free the constituent elements of film presentation and reception, by liberating the audience from its fixed position as a passive unified mass and encouraging participation, and by giving prominence to the audiovisual experience of the processes and material aspects of film presentation.

In common with many pioneers of the film co-op movement, avant-garde film and expanded cinema in Britain, during the 1960s Nicolson studied drawing and painting at art school, then turned her focus to the potential of film as a material in order to explore what she describes as the 'paradoxes' of film'.<sup>4</sup> Nicolson explains her movement away from the directness of mark-making to film in 1969 as: 'thinking out from the screen into the actual projection space', and focused on the 'physical reality of the situation and further into qualities of circumstantial phenomena'.<sup>5</sup>

### **Woman: seeing for herself**

For me, Nicolson is an artist whose feminism is integral to her identity as a creative practitioner. She takes a stance which is explicitly feminist in the statement *Woman and the Formal Film*, co-written with the group of women film-makers who collectively withheld their work from the 1979 Arts Council of Great Britain major retrospective exhibition 'Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910 – 75' because of the 'dominance of the masculinised modernist canon patronised by the Arts Council'.<sup>8</sup> The statement, written with Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Jeanette Iljon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy and Susan Stein, was included towards the end of the exhibition

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<sup>4</sup> Annabel Nicolson, in David Curtis and Deke Dusinbere (eds.), *A Perspective on English Avant-Garde Film* [touring exhibition publication], (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, and British Council 1978), no page numbers.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Nesbitt (ed.) *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965-75* [exhibition catalogue], (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2000), p.73.

<sup>8</sup> Jackie Hatfield, 'Expanded Cinema and Narrative: Some Reasons for a Review of the Avant-Garde Debates around Narrativity' *Millennium Film Journal* MFJ Numbers 39/40, 'Hidden Currents', (Winter 2003). Available: <http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ39/hatfieldpage.html>

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publication.<sup>9</sup> The signatories felt that the rich diversity of their practices in film, video and tape/slide was being forcibly constrained within the 'formal abstraction'/anti-narrative or 'art cinema'/narrative categories of a male-dominated canon. In protest against the way that the history of women's work was being represented in the exhibition, Nicolson, Lis Rhodes and Peter Gidal resigned their places on the curatorial panel.<sup>10</sup> Further, in a direct response to women's lack of recognition in the history of the moving image, she co-founded Circles, the feminist organisation which distributed films and videos by women. Moreover, although her own commentary about her work does not adopt an overt feminist perspective, I would suggest that her engagement with the possibilities of film embodies her gendered position 'in' and 'of' the feminine and centres on her presence 'as (a) woman'.

Felicity Sparrow refers to *Reel Time* as a 'proto-feminist' work,<sup>11</sup> and the focus of Nicolson's practice shifted away from film during the 1970s as she addressed female subjectivity more directly. Exemplars of feminist artwork include the 'menstrual hut' installation she created for the 1981 exhibition 'Concerning Ourselves' at Norwich Art Gallery, at the end of her year as John Brinkley Fellow at Norwich School of Art (1980 – 1981). For this exhibition, Nicolson collaborated with other women, 'all of whom are concerned with the numerous issues that arise from women's creativity'.<sup>12</sup> The shifts in Nicolson's practice during the 1970s resonate with the changes in the theoretical contexts of formalist film centred on the London Film-Makers' Co-op at the time. During that decade, theories of feminism and feminist film developed in academic environments from the impetus created by the largely pragmatic focus of the women's liberation movement in Britain and other cultural and socio-political factors. From the mid-1970s Nicolson sought to involve the audience in works such as the performance *Matches* (1975) and her work became more collaborative in nature. In 1978 she performed *Circadian Rhythm*, a long-duration performance with seven others, at the London Musicians' Collective. One of the ensemble, Evan Parker, writes that the group

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<sup>9</sup> Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clarke, Jeanette Ijon, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leese, Pat Murphy, and Susan Stein, 'Woman and the Formal Film', in *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975* [exhibition publication], (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, and Hayward Gallery, 3 May-17 June 1979), pp.118-120.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Mazière, *Institutional Support for Artists' Film and Video in England 1966–2003* [research paper], British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection [website], (London: AHRB Centre for British Film and Television Studies, 2003), 1/1979. Available: <http://www.studycollection.co.uk/maziere/paper.html>  
Accessed: 1 January 2013

<sup>11</sup> Felicity Sparrow (2005) 'Artists: Annabel Nicolson: The Art of Light and Shadow' in *Luxonline* [website], p.2. Available: [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel\\_nicolson/essay\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/essay(1).html)  
Accessed: 1 January 2013

<sup>12</sup> Norwich School of Art, *Concerning Ourselves: 1980 – 81 John Brinkley Fellowship Exhibition*, [press release] (Norwich: Norwich School of Art Gallery, 22 June–8 July 1981).

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intended "to play for a whole day", but they ended the performance after 13 hours.<sup>14</sup> For 'Women and Creativity' at the Hayward Annual she presented audio recordings of artists talking about their practice and encouraged the audience to contribute their own experiences. In addition, Nicolson increasingly developed her interest in the spontaneous, the ephemeral and the elemental, working out of doors in her performances *Sweeping the Sea* (1975) and *Combing the Fields* (1976).

From the late 1970s she became more actively feminist in her involvement with avant-garde film: her central role in Circles is evidence of her politicisation. Founded as a collective in 1979 by Nicolson with ten other women, this 'small network of resistance'<sup>17</sup> questioned dominant modes of representation and aimed to reconsider cinematic histories and confront an industry totally dominated by men, seeking to 'redress the balance'. Initiatives included creating a public place for showing work by women, holding screenings with women-only audiences followed by discussion, and conducting research into women's history. The work of Circles was funded in its early days by eleven women, who each contributed £20: Annabel Nicolson, Felicity Sparrow, Jane Clark, Jeanette Iljon, Joanna Davis, Lis Rhodes, Mary Pat Leece, Pat Murphy, Rachel Finkelstein, Susan Stein and Tina Keane.<sup>18</sup> Circles created new contexts for showing a range of work by women in film, video and tape/slide. The organisation 'brought back into circulation' work by early women film-makers, showing their films alongside contemporary work, and stressed the importance of nurturing different thoughts and developing ways of expressing them using moving image (*Seeing for ourselves*, 1983). Along with its sister organisation Cinema of Women, the other major distributor of feminist film in Britain, formed in 1979 as a collective by a group of women including Audrey Somerville and Caroline Spry, Circles played a critical role in the independent film and video culture of the 1980s for its advocacy and dissemination of historical and contemporary feminist practice. In 1991 a re-structuring of feminist distribution in Britain took place when Cinema of Women lost its funding. Circles kept its funding and relaunched as Cinenova: this organisation lost its revenue funding in 2001 and has since been run by volunteers. During the early 1980s Nicolson became more involved in feminist initiatives, including direct action peace protests associated with the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. She was involved the independent film sector in Britain and was a founder member of Falmouth Film and Video Workshop in Cornwall, an

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<sup>14</sup> Annabel Nicolson, with Evan Parker, Paul Burwell, Max Eastley, David Toop, Hugh Davies, Paul Lytton, and Paul Loven, *Circadian Rhythm*, Incus Records No. 33 [LP vinyl record] from audio recordings of the 1978 concert given at the 'Festival of Music/Context', (Incus Records, 1980).

<sup>17</sup> *Seeing for Ourselves: Woman Working in Film*, directed by Margaret Williams [DVD copy of television documentary programme] (Arbor International for Channel Four Television and the Arts Council of Great Britain, 1983), 56 min.

<sup>18</sup> Mel Taylor, quoted in Michael Mazière, *Institutional Support for Artists' Film and Video in England 1966 – 2003* [research paper], British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection [website], (London: AHRB Centre for British Film and Television Studies, 2003), 1/1979. Available: <http://www.studycollection.co.uk/maziere/paper.html>  
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organisation which was set up in 1985 and funded by South West Arts to support independent film-making, screenings and community based projects. Nicolson continued to exhibit her work, but by the mid-1980s she had ceased to use film in her creative practice, although she continued to perform and worked increasingly with cloth and organic materials, such as bark. For Annabel Nicolson, the emphasis was on the live event, of 'being there'. Felicity Sparrow, her contemporary and co-founder of Circles, affirms Nicolson's wish for her performance work not to be captured on video or by audio recording, and states that she was, 'fiercely resistant to having her work documented'.<sup>22</sup>

### **Artwork: Reel Time**

Annabel Nicolson 1972 and 1973

Variable duration. Black and white 16mm. A performance with sewing machine, projectors, long loop of film and two readers.

Felicity Sparrow describes one event in her Prologue *The Art of Light and Shadow* for LUX:

North London 1973, a Victorian dairy, a former industrial space designed to be cold, now housing artists' studios. Up a worn staircase to the third floor, a door gives onto a dimly-lit hall, the cinema space of the London Film-Makers' Co-op.

The audience is gathered, standing and sitting to the sides and behind a woman seated at a small table bearing a Singer sewing machine. In front are two screens, one at an angle; behind is a film projector. Light glints off a long strip of film which is strung on a loop from the ceiling, descending to the sewing-machine table and back to the projector. House lights dim and the show starts.

From one side a second projector starts running, throwing a silhouette onto the angled screen: a life size shadowgraph of the woman as she begins to operate the sewing machine. As the first projector starts an image appears to the front: the black and white picture is of the same woman operating the sewing machine.

The room is full of noise: the steady whirring of the projectors, the clacking and clicking of the filmstrip as it passes over pulleys and through the projector, the hum of the sewing machine as the woman turns the handle, intent on her sewing... she's sewing the filmstrip! Carefully she manoeuvres the loop of film so that it passes beneath the machine's needle before passing back to the projector. There's no thread but the perforation of the film's surface soon becomes evident, as tears and holes of

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<sup>22</sup> Felicity Sparrow (2005) 'Artists: Annabel Nicolson: The Art of Light and Shadow' in *Luxonline* [website], p.2. Available: [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel\\_nicolson/essay\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/essay(1).html)  
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leaking light begin to appear in the onscreen image. This continues; the film getting more and more damaged as it continues its perilous journey, sometimes spilling, gathering dust and scratches, slithering along the floor, spectators picking it up and passing it along. Intermittently the image blurs as the film clatters and slips in the gate until it snaps altogether.

In the lull, while the projectionist mends the break, one can discern the voices of two audience members, as they read occasionally from separate instruction manuals: 'how to thread a sewing machine' and 'how to thread a film projector'.

Once repaired the film starts again, but the pauses become more frequent as the brittle filmstrip deteriorates, needing further splices. The screen image becomes all-but-obliterated by light, unlike the real-time moving shadowgraph which remains constant. The performance ends with the film's destruction, when the projectionist announces that it can no longer pass through the projector. The house lights come on.<sup>23</sup>

### Thinking through practice

Nicolson punctures, literally, the illusion of cinema through her manipulation in 'real time' of the apparatus, breaking down the experience of cinema into its constituent parts. If we were there, we would see her feeding an unbroken loop of celluloid through her Singer sewing machine, and turning the handle by hand to punch holes with its needle in the filmstrip, which then passes through a film projector so that we can see an enlarged black and white recording on the screen of her working at the same sewing machine, damaged and shot through with holes that appear as shards of blazing white light. Eventually the film snaps, is mended, and the cycle continues, but finally the film and the cinematic projection falls apart, the procession of cinematic images is disrupted, and the performance ends.

### Women's work

Nicolson deployed textile-based practices within her engagement with celluloid, adopting a 'craft skills' methodology like many women artists of that time. The film scholar Gregory Zinman sees Nicolson's earlier work, the 1971 film *Slides*, for which she sewed together cut-up colour transparencies of her abstract paintings and then passed the joined-together images by hand through a film printing machine as, 'staking her claim for a space in two areas of artistic production dominated by men: abstract painting and abstract filmmaking'. He states that, 'the technique of sewing also connotes an ironic stance toward the notion of 'women's work,' even as it provides a new means of manipulating film by hand. For *Reel Time*, Nicolson put even more

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<sup>23</sup> Felicity Sparrow (2005) 'Annabel Nicolson: The Art of Light and Shadow' 'Artists: Annabel Nicolson' in *Luxonline* [website], p.1. Available: [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel\\_nicolson/essay\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/essay(1).html)  
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pressure on this concept - as well as on the material of the film itself'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Wounded bodies**

Nicolson wrote this reflective 'handwritten stream of consciousness' about *Reel Time* twenty years after its performance:

I was sitting with my back to them sewing  
a beam of light coming at me from the projector the film  
trying to hold the film in the sewing machine trying to sew fast enough  
to keep up with the projector the tension on the film realising  
the thing that holds it down so it wouldn't break trying again  
the holes in the film getting very torn another beam of light  
from the side casting my shadow on to a wall shadow of what  
I'm doing the murky image of me sewing in the film loop  
getting more light as the holes as the holes get more tears and breaks  
such a loud sound as it snaps aware of people trying to mend it  
I can sit for a moment hear the voices of the two readers  
words about threading the sewing machine threading the projector  
so similar the time the pace so slow just to read now and again  
don't have to allow spaces where nothing is happening  
the light catches the film loop so shiny because it is new  
light reflecting onto walls film very slack trickling through the room  
along the floor between people they help it along pass it back  
to the projectionist or to me I can't see any of them only the  
murky image of me sewing now very ripped and hard to get through  
the sewing machine let alone the projector how long will it last  
I keep going just keep doing it until they can't get it  
through the projector and it breaks down more and more often  
and it really can't go on and this jagged broken film  
the task done lies still people start to move tread carefully  
over the film I pick it up not sure what to do with it  
a tangled heap all broken spilling everywhere<sup>26</sup>

Nicolson's account conveys the immediacy of the occasion and its rich, interactive sensorium. She communicates the variable pace of the film loop's movement and suggests slowness by her use of 'trickling' and 'allow spaces where nothing is happening', and urgency through the phrase 'trying to sew fast enough/to keep up with the projector'. These rhythms are punctuated by the sound of the film breaking, 'such a

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<sup>25</sup> Gregory Zinman (2011) 'Annabel Nicolson' in *Handmade Cinema* [website]. Available: <http://handmadecinema.com/> Accessed: 1 January 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Annabel Nicolson, 'Annabel Nicolson - 'Handwritten Stream of Consciousness' Written in 1994: A Statement on *Reel Time* (1973)' in Jacqui Hatfield (ed.), *Experiments in Moving Image* (Luton: Epigraph Publications, 2004), p.65.

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loud sound as it snaps', and the finality of the film's destruction. She also recalls the projected film image of herself working at her sewing machine as being 'murky', in contrast to the clarity of the, 'beam of light/from the side casting my shadow on to a wall'. In addition, Nicolson suggests the vulnerability of the film loop and her empathetic connection to its irrevocable deterioration through her use of the words, 'this jagged broken film' and the final line, 'a tangled heap all broken spilling everywhere'.<sup>27</sup>

Through her words, the work is positioned firmly as a site for the wounded maternal body, spilling its guts. In psychoanalytic feminism the body is, 'the embodiment of the subject',<sup>28</sup> a key term in redefining subjectivity and its locus. As the Dutch feminist Rosi Braidotti explains, 'the redefinition of the female feminist subject starts with the revaluation of the bodily roots of subjectivity, rejecting the traditional vision of the knowing subject as universal, neutral and gender free'.<sup>29</sup>

### Inscribing femininity: 'as (a) woman'

The French philosopher, psychoanalyst and writer Luce Irigaray argued that the structure of specularization underlies all western thought and culture. By the term specularization, she refers to Jacques Lacan's revisioning of Freud in the mirror-stage, a corporeally focused developmental fantasy that precedes the formation of a child's ego and the 'I' of language - subjectivity, because in Lacanian terms, one-who-is-male becomes a subject through language. Lacan constructed a paradigm in which the young boy, offered a imaginary reflection of himself in a mirror, (by) his (m)other, who supports the processes of the male imaginary, identifies with this unified image, 'outside of himself', and then projects his male ego onto whatever he looks at. His image reflected back at him by the world, he sees himself everywhere.

Irigaray's use of the mirror as a metaphor posits woman as the tain. Women are matter. We are body. We constitute the mirror: we are the material of which it is made and therefore we can never see ourselves. In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray reiterates that man sees himself reflected back at him in the mirror of his 'sister', and the impossibility for her to see or be her own self (as 'nothing to see') within 'traditional sociocultural organization'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Annabel Nicolson, 'Annabel Nicolson - 'Handwritten Stream of Consciousness' Written in 1994: A Statement on Reel Time (1973)' in Jacqui Hatfield (ed.), *Experiments in Moving Image* (Luton: Epigraph Publications, 2004), p.65.

<sup>28</sup> Rosi Braidotti,(1992) 'On the Female Feminist Subject, Or: From 'She-Self' to 'She-Other' in Gisela Bock and Susan James (eds.),*Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, (Taylor and Francis, 2005, e-Library edition), (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.177-192 (p.173).

<sup>29</sup> Rosi Braidotti,(1992) 'On the Female Feminist Subject, Or: From 'She-Self' to 'She-Other' in Gisela Bock and Susan James (eds.),*Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, (Taylor and Francis, 2005, e-Library edition), (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.177-192 (p.171).

<sup>30</sup> Luce Irigaray 'An Ethics of Sexual Difference' in Luce Irigaray *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C Gill, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.99- 112 (p.100).



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### Mapping the theoretical terrain

'Making as a woman' is a creative strategy proposed by Irigaray as a subversive modality of thinking and writing that 'jams the machinery' of patriarchal discourse and specular logic, and enables other discourses to reveal themselves. Writing in *This Sex Which Is Not One* Irigaray stressed that what was important was not a complementary theory in which women could become subjects, but that of 'jamming the theoretical machinery itself'.<sup>31</sup> *Écriture féminine* is a term used by Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and others to denote 'feminine writing', the transformative practices that come through the body, a language of the body. Note that a man can also produce feminine writing if he takes an appropriate structural position: in other words, one that is not phallogocentric. Irigaray uses the term *parler-femme* for feminine writing, a practice that enunciates a position of/by/with the feminine that is doubled. The English translation of Irigaray's term 'speaking (as) woman', retains the pun of the original French, 'par les femmes' (by women). The film critic Catherine Constable in her recent book *Thinking in Images* argues that Irigaray's critique in *The Speculum of the Other Woman* enables the creation of 'spaces for subversion within philosophy',<sup>33</sup> and creates openings into the phallogocentric theorising of film, women and the feminine. Margaret Whitford in her commentary *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* used the model of psychoanalytic practice to propose that *parler-femme* is like the analysand's unconscious making itself heard during an analysis session, something that can modify the structures of the unconscious itself. She writes,

we might understand the idea of a woman's language as the articulation of the unconscious which cannot speak *about* itself, but which can nonetheless make itself heard if the listener is attentive enough.<sup>34</sup>

In her film-sewing projection performance *Reel Time*, Annabel Nicolson listens to her body speaking, feeling her way in the *espacement*, the space in between. As an artist she practices a sensuous and tactile engagement with her surroundings and the substances that are present, both material and psychic. Her presence 'as (a) woman' is an essential constituent of her work, which embodies the feminine.

### Real women, real issues: 1970s to twenty first century

#### Gendered machines

The sewing machine is a mechanical device operated by hand, foot or electricity that

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<sup>31</sup> Luce Irigaray, (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke from the French *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.76-77 (p.78).

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Constable, *Thinking in Images: Film Theory, Feminist Philosophy and Marlene Dietrich*, (London: Bristish Film Institute, 2005), p.25.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1986), p.39.

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was intended for use in the home by women from the mid-1900s onward. It is the first machine to occupy a position in the living room. Sewing was a naturally 'feminine' (sedentary and 'passive') activity done by women to care for their family and maintain their home, and the 'needle' was a metaphor for maternal devotion and domestic bliss. In contrast to her sewing machine, the operation of which Nicolson felt comfortable and confident, the technological aspects of film-making and projecting were challenging. The freelance curator Felicity Sparrow has referred to the 'proto-feminist aspect' of Nicolson's performance *Reel Time*.<sup>36</sup> Sparrow's doctoral research looks at the formation of Circles, the feminist distributor of women's moving image, which she founded in 1979 with Nicholson, and has published essays about the expanded cinema of the 1970s and the work of Annabel Nicolson. Her observation highlights gender as being *the* issue in the live encounter between 'the domestic sphere of sewing and the public space of performance', established by the machines themselves. Sparrow considers Nicolson's linking of the domestic sewing machine with a film projector in 1973<sup>37</sup> to be 'revelatory' for that time.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

In this artwork we see the personal politicised. Almost one hundred years ago the filmmaker Alice Guy wrote, 'There is nothing connected with the staging of a motion picture that a woman cannot do as easily as a man and there is no reason why she cannot master every technicality of the Art'.<sup>39</sup> She is considered to be the world's first female director. Guy was a pioneer of narrative film, responsible for a phenomenal output of hundreds of short films and twenty two features in a career that stretched from the beginnings of cinema in 1896 to 1920. Yet she was absent from cinematic history for most of the twentieth century, excluded and made invisible by her gender, although her achievement and importance were more widely recognized after the publication of her memoirs in 1976.

In her work, Irigaray explores the association of woman and the maternal with nature and 'unthinking matter', material that is inert, lifeless and unthinking. Mimesis and 'strategic essentialism' are deployed by Irigaray to create an ingress into masculinist

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<sup>36</sup> Felicity Sparrow (2005) 'Annabel Nicolson: The Art of Light and Shadow' 'Artists: Annabel Nicolson' in *Luxonline* [website], p.2. Available: [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel\\_nicolson/essay\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/essay(1).html)  
Accessed: 1 January 2013

<sup>37</sup> Almost all sources give the date for *Reel Time* as 1973. However, in her essay published in the journal *Vertigo*, Sparrow dates the illustrative photograph of Nicolson performing the work as 1972 (Sparrow, 2001); Nicolson's filmography on page 134 of the publication for the exhibition 'Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain 1965 – 75', held in 2000, gives 1972-73 for *Reel Time*.

<sup>38</sup> Felicity Sparrow (2005) 'Annabel Nicolson: The Art of Light and Shadow' 'Artists: Annabel Nicolson' in *Luxonline* [website], p.2. Available: [http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel\\_nicolson/essay\(1\).html](http://www.luxonline.org.uk/artists/annabel_nicolson/essay(1).html)  
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<sup>39</sup> Alice Guy, 'A Woman's Place in Photography Productions', *Moving Picture World*, (11 July 1914), reprinted in *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910 – 1975*, (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), pp.124-125 (p.125).

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discourse, using repetition as a means to affect change and create an opening through which a reconstitution of femininity on its own terms may be effected and 'her own' genealogy created. Mimetic practices can be risky as they re-affirm the subordinate position of woman and the patriarchal model of femininity through imitative behaviour: Irigaray 'uses 'mimicry' and 'mimesis' interchangeably, thus fully exploiting their connotations'.<sup>41</sup> However, Hilary Robinson considers mimicry to be a form of mimesis that is 'non-productive', and associated with mime and the masquerade of femininity 'which maintain patriarchal structures'.<sup>42</sup> Robinson uses the term 'productive mimesis' for sites of resistance to patriarchal femininity and the hypothesisation of feminine subjectivities that could exist beyond the masculinist paradigm. Unproductive mimetic strategies include hysteria and paralysis, and the ultimate annihilation of the self through death.

Art can be seen as a specularized simulacrum of nature, a re-production of that which exists 'naturally' in the world. Irigaray states that, 'women can play with mimesis ... because they are capable of bringing new nourishment to its operation ... re-producing (from) nature ... giving it form in order to appropriate it for oneself'.<sup>43</sup> Braidotti suggests that mimesis, when it is in its 'productive' mode, enables women to revisit and repossess territory, 'where 'woman' was essentialized, disqualified or simply excluded'.<sup>44</sup> For Robinson, the maternal body is the, 'most poignant of all [these] discursive and material sites'.<sup>45</sup>

Irigaray's theorisation of the feminine, and in particular the modal strategy of mimesis, is criticised by some commentators as essentialising. However, Braidotti, amongst others, refutes this, and sees Irigarayan 'productive mimesis' that is sited within the area of reproduction as supportive of, 'the project redefining female subjectivity', rather than reducing woman to a biological function as a mother.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Alison Martin, 'Luce Irigaray and the Question of the Divine' *MHRA Texts and Dissertations* Volume 53, (Leeds: Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p.8.

<sup>43</sup> Luce Irigaray, (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke from the French *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp.76-77.

<sup>44</sup> Rosi Braidotti, (1992) 'On the Female Feminist Subject, Or: From 'She-Self' to 'She-Other' in Gisela Bock and Susan James (eds.), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, (Taylor and Francis, 2005, e-Library edition), (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.177-192 (p.187).

<sup>45</sup> Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, (New York and London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p.43.

<sup>46</sup> Rosi Braidotti, (1992) 'On the Female Feminist Subject, Or: From 'She-Self' to 'She-Other' in Gisela Bock and Susan James (eds.), *Beyond Equality and Difference: Citizenship, Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, (Taylor and Francis, 2005, e-Library edition), (London/New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.177-192 (p.177).

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To draw my chapter to a conclusion, in her film-sewing 'performance projection' *Reel Time*, I believe that Annabel Nicolson is practicing a mimetic strategy that is 'productive', to use Robinson's term. In her performance, the artist destroys her specularised representation by piercing the celluloid through the needle action of her hand-cranked sewing machine: her living breathing corporeal body thus damages irrevocably the illusory moving image of herself projected large onto the screen through the tattoo of her mechanical needle, which is unthreaded.

In *Reel Time*, the activity of sewing is foregrounded within a proto-feminist methodology that is based in, 'the politics of the personal, in which women's subjectivities and experiences of everyday life become the site of the redefinition of patriarchal meanings and values and of resistance to them'.<sup>47</sup> In *Reel Time* a personal-political drama is performed by, with and through the body of the young woman artist and the focused violence of her empty needle in the cinema space she has created. Through effecting a live encounter between a domestic sewing machine and a film projector, Nicolson takes on the most pressing issues of that time: a woman's struggle for identity within her family, personal and sexual relationships, and for equality and autonomy at home, at work, and in the world. In *Reel Time* she positions her own experience and those of other women at the heart of her work, and, in doing so, 'jams the machinery' of dominant masculinist film culture and wider society: her image captured on film is shredded and destroyed, can never be reconstituted, the projector breaks down, there is darkness... then the houselights come on, the performance is over, and the 'personal-political' continues in real time.

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<sup>47</sup> Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.5.